



## Chapter 7 Customer Service in Action

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*This chapter of the Toolkit offers some examples of what environmental agencies are doing to improve customer satisfaction.*

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### Introduction

This Toolkit presents an approach to developing world class customer service in permitting programs. While we have described a process, and hopefully given you the tools to identify and evaluate your customers' needs, we cannot prescribe the right solutions for your organization. Nevertheless, we believe it is useful to offer some *real-world* examples of what organizations like yours are doing. This chapter may inspire you as to what's possible, and give you some leads on whom you may contact for further information.

This is by no means an exhaustive account of what is happening across the country and it may not be completely up-to-date, but we think it reflects some of the more interesting and innovative efforts we've learned about during our work.

### Permit Assistance/Information Center

States offer a variety of assistance to permit applicants and citizens who want help with permit information and application processing. The most common approach was establishing either a permit information center or a designated coordinator to serve as a single point of access to the regulatory agency.

Permit assistance offered by one or more states:

- \$ Answering general phone inquiries and referring, as needed, to the appropriate program permitting staff [Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina]
- \$ Helping the permit applicant identify the types of permits, certifications, or approvals it needs [North Carolina, Oklahoma, Vermont]
- \$ Coordinating pre-application meetings between the permit applicant and the program offices [Maryland, Missouri]
- \$ Helping the permit applicant evaluate alternative permitting processes [Vermont]

- \$ Serving as a repository for all permit information; distributing guidance materials, permit assistance directory, and application forms for easy distribution to the public [North Carolina]
- \$ Establishing a tracking system that provides the public/applicant with fast information on the status of permit applications [Maryland]

### **Stakeholders' Early Participation in the Permit Process**

Citizens often believe agencies make major decisions on a permit long before they seek public input, or that the public doesn't have enough time to properly evaluate a permit application.

They may raise issues at the draft permit stage that could have been more readily, and less expensively, resolved earlier in the process. To respond to these concerns, some organizations are soliciting earlier stakeholder involvement than typically occurs.

For example, EPA Region 2 implemented a Permit Complaint System Policy with enhanced stakeholder communication procedures. The policy includes enhanced public access to permit information, including Internet access, mailings to stakeholders on a permit-specific basis, early identification of issues, and expedited complaint resolution earlier in the permit process than prescribed under regulation.

Among states, Connecticut and Maine established an early public involvement program to seek input from the permit applicant and public at the beginning of the permit process. Under Connecticut's *Early Public Participation Program*, a public notice informs citizens that the agency has received a completed permit application. Citizens may request a public meeting to discuss the proposed application before any decision is made by the agency. In Maine's case, a team of project managers meets with potential applicants at the early stages of the permitting process. This pre-application meeting allows both parties to identify any applicable regulations, and even analyze and resolve potential issues before the official application is filed with the regulatory agency.

While Connecticut and Maine seek all stakeholders' input on the permit application process, South Dakota seeks input from the public and the regulated community on proposed new regulations. The goal is to seek early input from all stakeholders for applicability, practicality and enforceability before rules are promulgated.

### **Plain Language**

The federal government is working to improve the clarity of regulatory language in its letters and communications by using plain English. In a similar effort, South Dakota has a "Plain English" program underway. Under this program, South Dakota's written and oral communications are made easier to understand than the usual bureaucratic or technical jargon. Through this program, even enforcement letters are written in simple language so that violators better understand what needs to be done. South Dakota believes using plain English helps small business owners better understand

what the agency is doing, what it requires, and what services it offers. It may even boost compliance.

### **Permit Processing/Issuance Timeframes**

Currently, most permit applicants don't know when an agency will make a decision on their permit. Such unpredictability may create the perception that the state is not responsive to the needs of the business, which, in turn, creates frustration on both sides.

Consistent with one of EPA's aforementioned customer service standards for permitting, several states have passed laws requiring their agencies to establish time frames for processing permit applications and issuing certain final permits. Maine, Maryland, Hawaii, and Vermont have set either a "guaranteed" or a targeted "goal" timeline on their permit decision processes. The "goal" takes into account a number of factors, including complexity of the permitting process, extent of public involvement, permit backlogs, or lack of program resources.

For most major permits, Maryland, requires agencies to establish money-back guarantees of permit application fees if they fail to issue permit decisions by the dates promised. In Hawaii, the permit is automatically approved if the agency fails to act within the prescribed time.

Other states, including Oklahoma and Connecticut, have set permitting timeframes without legislation. They have established permitting timeline goals for regulated communities. The states say this approach has reduced permit processing timeframes and, consequently, improved customer satisfaction.

To measure the success of its agency in meeting the established timelines, Vermont's legislature required the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation to generate annual reports on how they are doing and ways to correct problems.

Maryland requires its program offices to generate success reports on adherence to permit processing timeframes.

### **Customer Satisfaction Surveys**

Several states are conducting surveys to assess their customers' satisfaction. Maine, Oklahoma, and Delaware use mail surveys to assess satisfaction with their staff's courtesy, timeliness, knowledge and quality of service. Missouri, North Carolina and Vermont surveys measure satisfaction with the permitting process. These agencies include a customer survey with each individual permit.

While the above-mentioned states primarily survey their external customers, Wisconsin also conducts internal surveys of its permitting staff for continuous quality improvement of its processes. They gather information on how and what data are used for permitting decisions. Wisconsin believes that, by understanding staff needs, they will enable the state to focus on specific areas/issues, which should improve service to their external customers.

While most of the states conducted surveys annually, Vermont experienced some poor response rates and has decided to revamp its processes. One option may be conducting a more intensive effort, but less frequently.

### **Incentive/Award/Reward Programs**

EPA Region 6 has implemented an innovative and effective employee recognition system for excellence in customer service. It includes initiatives such as *Peer Recognition Certificates* with time off awards, a *Monthly Customer Service Awards* program, the *Regional Administrator's Annual Customer Service Award*, the *Division Director Customer Service Awards*, and a *Mystery Caller* awards program to improve voice mail messages.

Delaware implemented monthly *Customer Service Awards* to recognize staff for providing outstanding service to internal and external customers. Monthly award recipients are selected by customer service representatives from each of the division's sections.